

10.7  
N44

Edue. THE LIBRARY OF THE

MAY 10 1927

# THE ENGLISH LEAFLET

Published by the New England Association of Teachers of English, Boston

EDITOR

Charles Swain Thomas, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

SECRETARY-TREASURER

A. Bertram DeMille, Winthrop, Massachusetts

Subscription price, One Dollar

VOL. XXVI

MAY, 1927

NUMBER 231

## A REAL PRINCE OF DENMARK

THEODORE HALBERT WILSON

Saint Johnsbury Academy

WE have just passed through Holy Week, a week during which our thoughts have been turned toward the sublime character of Jesus of Nazareth. In spite of open opposition, cunning connivance, and tragic treachery, he held true to his highest ideals, and, as a consequence, met his death. But despite his own demise, his Cause triumphed. This is the truth of which Holy Week reminds humanity—the man who would be true to his noblest instincts, the man who would follow his conscience, universally encounters obstacles, and often faces premature death, but his Cause eventually is crowned with success.

Shakespeare puts this same truth in most dramatic fashion in the play which perhaps is his masterpiece, *Hamlet*. Barrett Wendell, recently one of the most brilliant members of the English department at Harvard College, claimed "that *Hamlet* has given rise to more speculation, to a wider range of thought and comment, than any other single work in English literature." (*William Shakespeare*, p. 251)

The interpretations of the character of the Prince of Denmark which have received widest vogue are those which have not been written by dramatists, but have been written by poets, philosophers, and professors. The professors have too frequently accepted the verdict of the poets and the philosophers. Poets and philosophers—not all, to be sure, but very many—habitually think in terms of the obscure and the mysterious, and write to stimulate thought rather than to create a vivid and clear impression. Their thoughts often

are hidden, and have to be laboriously unveiled before the uninitiated can grasp their meaning. Poets and philosophers usually write for the few rather than for the many, for the educated rather than for the uneducated. Not so with the dramatist, however. The practical playwright must convey his ideas quickly by word and by action. He must make his thought plain to the masses of untutored folk who attend the theater. And he must express the truth which he wishes to impart in such wise as to enable uneducated folk to grasp it by witnessing just one performance. The playwright must tell his entire story and reach all ranges of intellect within the brief space of from two to two and one half hours.

When we endeavor to interpret the plays of Shakespeare, we must remind ourselves that Shakespeare wrote those plays to be seen and heard, not to be read and studied. Shakespeare knew better than any other playwright of the Elizabethan period what the frequenters of the theater desired, and what they could be expected to glean from witnessing one and only one performance. He wrote for these persons. He was not a college-trained man, and he probably never gave a thought to the conclusions that might be drawn as a result of the critical study of his plays by students and scholars of subsequent centuries. He was a practical dramatist, not an exact scholar. He wrote to amuse, not to confuse; to edify, not to stupefy.

This fact seems to have been overlooked by such writers as Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge, and a host of others who have sought to read into *Hamlet* what nowhere appears evident in the play itself. Dowden, the *London Quarterly Review* of 1847, Professor Kittredge, and a relatively few other notable interpreters of Shakespearean drama have dared to differ with the German and the English literary critics who saw in Hamlet a weak-willed, meditative procrastinator who, by indecision and procrastination, brought death to five persons in addition to himself. To use the words of Professor Kittredge, "Hamlet's will to do his duty was not defective; but Hamlet lacked evidence as to what his duty really was".\*

---

\* Address before the New England Association of Teachers of English, Boston, March 12, 1927.



Suppose we refresh our minds on the play itself and ask: "In the early seventeenth century, what idea would an unbiased theater-goer of average intelligence and of relatively meager formal schooling understand to be Shakespeare's thought in *Hamlet*?" In order to keep this article within reasonable limits, we must pass over many points which would help clarify Shakespeare's thought and must content ourselves with the major points.

In the first act of the play the observer would discover that Hamlet, thirty years of age, still pursuing university studies, a young man of fine grain, of noble instincts, of lofty ideals, of keen moral discernment, is distressed over the marriage of his mother to his uncle within two months after the mysterious and sudden death of Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark. In keeping with the practice of the time, Claudius, by marrying Gertrude, became the reigning monarch, not merely the husband of the queen. Informed by his most trusted friend, Horatio, that for three successive nights what appears to be the armed ghost of the dead king has been seen on the platform before the castle, Hamlet joins the guards and Horatio and encounters the ghost.

And here we should remind ourselves that the Elizabethans universally believed in ghosts—both good and bad.

The ghost beckons Hamlet to follow. Horatio and the guard protest for fear that the ghost has evil designs. While Hamlet recognizes this possibility, yet he feels that it is his duty to hear the ghost if it be the spirit of his father, and, in order to have his conscience clear, he is willing to die rather than to be unfilial. Therefore, he accompanies the ghost to another part of the platform, out of sight and hearing of the others. And the ghost, after informing Hamlet that it is his father's spirit, relates how he had been poisoned by Claudius, who had won Gertrude's love.

Was the apparition his father's spirit, come to help; or was it a messenger of the devil, come to harm? The spectator questioned; but he did not know.

Hamlet must ascertain. To do so he must prevent any one from knowing of the ghost's appearance. He took the guard and Horatio into his confidence, told them that he was going to feign insanity, and swore them to secrecy. And

then he voiced the sentiment of nearly every idealist who faces a Herculean task in the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation".

The time is out of joint;—O, cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right! (I, 5, 189-190)

Too big a task for him? Never. Even an Elijah, confronted with similar conditions, felt his loneliness, and cried: "The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away." (I Kings 19:14.) It is the cry of solitude. Hamlet, pure of mind, lofty of purpose, and guided by conscience, is surrounded by stealth, immorality, and grossness. These he must combat. To this task he sets himself with such singleness of purpose that he abandons his studies, foregoes his happy relations with Ophelia, and even subjects himself to the humiliation of seeming to be insane.

In the second act he finds himself misunderstood by Ophelia, maligned by her brother, Laertes, and her father, Polonius, and spied upon by former friends who have been inveigled into the doing of his uncle's nefarious behests. But he clings tenaciously to his objective. When he learns of the presence at the castle of a troupe of wandering actors, he hastily tests their histrionic ability, is satisfied that they can do a reasonably satisfactory bit of acting, and arranges for them to produce *The Murder of Gonzago* and to insert a passage which he himself will write so as to make the whole closely resemble the circumstances under which, according to the ghost, Claudius had poisoned the elder Hamlet.

Again, Shakespeare seeks to safeguard his meaning and to press it home even to the most obtuse observer of the play, by making Hamlet explain exactly what he purposes to do. Hamlet knows that if Claudius shows the slightest qualms of conscience the apparition was not a devil, but was his father's spirit.

In the third act Hamlet obtains the evidence he has needed. When the traveling troupe comes to the point at which poison is poured into the ear of the sleeper, Claudius rises, Gertrude,



Ophelia, Polonius, and others cry out, and the king calls for light.

The lights come on. All except Hamlet and Horatio depart. Hamlet, overjoyed, knows that the ghost was not a devil, but was his father's spirit. He knows his duty. He must rid Denmark of the stench of having a murderer as its wrongful king.

He is summoned to his mother's room. He starts. He passes Claudius, draws his sword, and is on the point of fulfilling his duty by straightway murdering his uncle. But again conscience is supreme. To murder a man who was in the act of prayer, was to send that man's soul to heaven. This was not a fancy of Hamlet; this was a generally accepted belief of Elizabethan England. And Hamlet was not willing to defeat his own ends by undue haste.

A procrastinator? No. A man whose life is governed by conscience, a man who will not stoop to do a gross injustice to his murdered father and to his suffering native land!

Hamlet passes on and engages in conversation with his mother and discovers an eavesdropper behind the screen. His chance has come! He will do his duty! An eavesdropper's soul would be sent to hell! He whips out his sword, thrusts it through the screen, and stabs the eavesdropper. Disappointed, he discovers the body, not of Claudius, but of a spy, Polonius. For the second time in the one evening, Hamlet's good intentions have been foiled.

Now the ghost appears once more. Hamlet is torturing his mother's soul by painting in all its hideousness her sin in marrying the murderer of her former husband. His words strike deep and stab her to the quick. She begs, implores, beseeches him to desist. But on he thrusts. And the ghost, seen and heard by Hamlet, but neither seen nor heard by Gertrude, speaks, reminding him of his earlier intention to be lenient with the queen. Called back to his almost blunted purpose not to harm his mother, Hamlet changes from invective to imprecation. He implores his mother to cast aside the baser life she is sharing with Claudius, and to rise again to the nobler life she formerly shared with the elder Hamlet.

We come to the fourth act with the uncle still living. When Hamlet comes into the presence of the king, he discovers that

he is thwarted again, for his uncle's thoughts seem bent on two errands of mercy: first, the proper disposition of the body of Polonius; second, Hamlet's safe removal from Denmark before the populace harms him for murdering Polonius. To kill Claudius then would have been to send his soul to heaven, not to hell. Hamlet does, however, show his utter contempt for his uncle. When the king asks: "Where is Polonius?" Hamlet replies: "In heaven; sent thither to see: if your messenger find him not there, seek him i' the other place yourself." (IV, 3, 33-34)

Hamlet is packed off to England. He surmises mischief, steals the commission which Guildenstern and Rosencrantz have in their possession, discovers that his uncle had ordered that Hamlet be murdered as soon as he lands in England, and writes new orders which call for the murder of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, thus furthering his object by ridding Denmark of two traitorous hirelings. The ship is attacked by pirates. Hamlet boards the pirate vessel, wins the co-operation of the pirates by promising them ample reward if they will help him return to Denmark, and sails back. He sends a letter to his uncle asking for an immediate interview, and, desirous of safeguarding against possible miscarriage of his plans, requests that he may see Claudius alone.

When the fifth act opens, Hamlet, on the way to the castle, meets the king at the grave of Ophelia. The king was in the act of paying last tribute to the daughter of his most trusted servant. To kill now would be unpardonable and would result in sending his soul to heaven, not to hell.

While Hamlet, back at the castle, is informing Horatio of the latest developments in his attempt to carry out his duty, a messenger arrives from the king and informs Hamlet that Claudius has accepted a wager that Hamlet can defeat Laertes in a dual. Again Hamlet is tricked out of immediately killing his uncle; for until Claudius's thoughts have been turned from favoring Hamlet, Claudius's soul is headed toward heaven, rather than toward hell. So Hamlet accepts the challenge and fights with Laertes. He has the upper hand, but finally is scratched by Laertes's rapier, and then snatches the rapier and mortally wounds Laertes. Laertes tells him that the point was poisoned, that Gertrude has died of poison

intended for Hamlet, and that "the king's to blame" for it all.

Hamlet now realizes that, for the first time since he knew what his duty really was, his chance has come. Claudius's thoughts are bent on evil. If killed now, Claudius's soul will go to hell. He stabs the king.

Laertes asks Hamlet's forgiveness and frees Hamlet from all responsibility for the death of himself and his father. Hamlet turns to his one and only trusted friend, Horatio, and says:

Horatio, I am dead;  
Thou livest; report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied.

He bids Horatio tell young Fortinbras of Norway that Hamlet gave his dying voice for the restoration to him of the lands which Hamlet the elder had taken from Fortinbras the elder.

He has avenged his father's murder. He has rid Denmark of its villainous king and some of his fiendish accomplices. He has righted the wrong committed by his father on Norway. He has done his duty by setting right the time that was out of joint. He has persuaded Horatio to continue to live and to see that people understand Hamlet's motives and that his cause triumphs. He dies.

Horatio speaks:

Now cracks a noble heart.—Goodnight, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

(V, 2, 359-360)

A prince of untainted mind, of unsullied conscience. The Prince of Denmark who, like the Prince of Peace, though the victim of open opposition, cunning connivance, and tragic treachery, held to his highest ideals, and, as a consequence, met an untimely death. But despite his own demise, his Cause triumphed.



## AN ILLUSTRATION OF HANDICAPS IN THE APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE

MY INTERPRETATION OF EMERSON'S "BRAHMA"

HELEN ELIZABETH NUTE

Walnut Hill School

WE teachers of English are frequently exhorted to write themes with our pupils, to follow the directions of our own assignments as conscientiously as if we were the educands and not the educators, even to take the examinations we set—all for the purpose of attaining a more sympathetic understanding of the needs and abilities of our pupils. Seldom, however, are we given the advice to put ourselves in the position of the students in regard to the interpretation of literature; yet there, if anywhere, we need to realize the difficulties which beset the neophyte. We forget the obstacles to comprehension which confronted us when our literary backgrounds were as meagre as theirs; many of us never attack a new piece of literature that is comparable in difficulty for us to that studied in our classes for our pupils. Surely we need occasionally to work out the interpretation of a poem that is as difficult for us as Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, for example, is to young people. It seems reasonable to believe that a consciousness of our own inadequacy in interpreting certain passages may make us more alert in recognizing the handicaps of our pupils in understanding passages which have long been familiar to us; and more sympathetic in dealing with their inadequacies.

As a good example of a poem that is reasonably difficult for the average teacher of English, and therefore suited to the purpose of serving as an exercise in interpretation, I chose Emerson's *Brahma*. This poem seldom receives much, if any, comment in annotated editions; and to me, at least, the literary background necessary for appreciation of it was decidedly meagre. If I had not read it with a definite purpose in mind, I should have passed over it casually as a rather negligible expression of Emerson's interest in Oriental mysticism which had little interest for me. It reminded me of Swinburne's *Hertha*, and seemed to bear a faint resemblance to the ideas embodied in Emerson's essay on *The Over-*



*soul*, about which I had only a dim recollection, as I had not read it in years. It was only after several readings that I began to realize that I could hardly hope to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation merely by a close study of the poem itself, which I will include here for the sake of convenience.

## BRAHMA

If the red slayer think he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear;  
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.

After the first reading I thought that the theme was the immortal soul, as the first stanza seemed to designate something indestructible and eternal, and the next two stanzas seemed to amplify this idea by the use of specific details; but after several more readings I was not so sure that the soul was meant, after all, for the last stanza seemed contradictory. If that which is designated by the pronoun of the first person in the first three stanzas is the immortal soul, then the one who possesses it (according to the last stanza) turns his back on heaven. Furthermore, though immortality is commonly attributed to the gods, in this stanza "The strong gods pine for my abode." Clearly I could not assume that the theme was the immortal soul unless I discovered some unusual explanation for the fourth stanza. Besides, if such were the theme, why was the title *Brahma*? And if the poem

was an expression of Oriental mysticism, why should Emerson have used the term *red slayer*, which to me had the unfortunate connotation of the American Indian?

I decided that I must gain some information about Emerson's philosophy if I wished to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of *Brahma*, and in my search for enlightenment I chanced upon a book by William Sloane Kennedy entitled *Clews to Emerson's Mystic Verse* which proved most helpful. It was therein stated that the source of Brahma was in the Bhagavad Gita, chapter two, which embodies the doctrines of the Vedic Upanishads written two thousand years previously. The meaning of several unfamiliar words and phrases was given, and I thus disposed of some of the minor difficulties:

The *red slayer* is a member of the Sshatrujas, the warrior caste of India.

The *strong gods* are Indra, Agni, and Yama. (Wisdom, Fire, and Death)

The *sacred Seven* are the seven Maharshis, or highest saints.

The bit of information which was the source of my final enlightenment was also found in this book, and consisted of the statement that a translation of certain of the Vedic Upanishads had appeared in America in 1852, and that Emerson had read the copy in the Harvard Library and had been particularly influenced by the Katha and Isa Upanishads. I procured a copy of the translation of these Upanishads and several others, and read a considerable portion of them, finding what I considered conclusive evidence that Emerson in *Brahma* was simply voicing in poetic form the central thought of the Katha Upanishad, and the basic belief of the Brahma religion.

Although I have no actual proof, I infer that Emerson read Dr. E. Roër's translation of the Upanishads, an edition of which appeared in 1847. I found, at least, that the language in *Brahma* resembled that of Dr. Roër's translation more closely than that of other translations—specifically *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, Robert Ernest Hume, M. A., Ph. D. (1921, Oxford University Press), and



*Sacred Books of the East*, Max Müller, (1884, Clarendon Press).

The Katha Upanishad consists mainly of a conversation between the young man Nachikéatas and the god Yama (Death) on the subject of immortality. Vâgasravasa, the father of Nachikéatas, wishing for rewards, had sacrificed all his wealth. Faith entered into the boy at the time when the cows that were to be given by his father as presents to the priests were brought in. He asked his father, "To whom wilt thou give me?" Receiving no reply, he asked a second and a third time, and then the father angrily replied, "To Death I give thee." So he had to sacrifice his son to Yama.

According to instructions given him by a voice, Nachikéatas went to Yama's home during the absence of the god and dwelt there for three nights without eating. When Yama returned he asked how many nights the boy had been there. On receiving the reply, "Three", he asked, "What didst thou eat the first night?"

The boy replied, "Thy offspring."

"And what didst thou eat the second night?"

"Thy cattle."

"What didst thou eat the third night?"

"Thy good works."

These replies of Nachikéatas, given according to the instructions of the voice that had guided him to Yama, pleased the god, and he said, "As thou hast dwelt in my house three nights without eating, therefore choose three boons."

As a third boon the boy asked to know whether the soul exists after the death of man. Yama tried to avoid granting this boon, but as he had promised, he finally yielded and explained the nature of Brahma and the way to obtain Brahma. The rest of the Upanishad is devoted to his explanation. In line 19 of the second Valli (creeper) he says:

"If the slayer thinks he slays; if the slain thinks he is slain, then both of them do not know well. It (the soul) does not slay, nor is it slain.

"The soul, which is subtler than what is subtle, greater than what is great, is seated in the cavity of the living being."

Plainly, then, since Emerson's first stanza is so nearly identical to this passage, he must have been referring to the

soul in his poem. Besides, the meaning of *Brahma* as explained by Yama supports such an interpretation:

"The perfect one who, building desire after desire, is awake in those that are asleep is called even pure, is called *Brahma*, is called even immortal."

Yama represented the soul under many contradictory attributes to show the difficulty of comprehending it. I concluded, therefore, that Emerson had followed the same plan and had also represented the soul as possessing contradictory attributes, some of which were chosen from the Vedic version, and others, as far as I could judge, formulated by himself to amplify the same idea. It may be, however, that a more thorough search through the Upanishads would disclose the source of all the stated attributes. The sources which I did discover are the following:

In line two, stanza two, occur the words *shadow and sunlight*. In the third Valli of the Katha Upanishad is this: "The supreme and inferior souls, drinking the due reward from their works in this world, entered both the cave, the highest place of the supreme soul. The knowers of *Brahma* call them shadow and sunlight."

In the third line of the second stanza Emerson has: "The vanished gods to me appear." In the Upanishad is this sentence: "With reference to this question there was enquired of old, even by the gods; for it is not easy to understand, subtle is its nature."

The third stanza has the line: "I am the doubter and the doubt." The Vedic has: "That soul declared by an inferior man is not easily to be known, as it is to be thought of in various ways, but when it is declared by a teacher who beholds no difference, there is no doubt concerning it."

The first line of the second stanza, "Far or forgot to me is near" is like the description of *Brahma* given in the Isa Upanishad:

"It moves. It moves not  
It is far and it is near.  
It is within all this  
And it is outside all this."

(R. E. Hume's translation.)

and like the description in the Mundaka Upanishad:



"This being of Brahma is great, divine, of a nature not to be conceived by thinking. More subtle than what is subtle, it shines in various ways, it is more distant than what is distant, and also near in this body."

The last line of the third stanza, "And I the hymn the Brahmin sings," is similar to this passage in the Taittiriya (or Isa) Upanishad: "Om is Brahma . . . . Om the hymns of Sama sing. Om, Som, the hymns of praise proclaim." Dr. Hume explains, too, that in the Rig-Veda *Brahma* seems to have meant first *hymn, prayer, sacred knowledge, magic formula*, and is used in this sense in the Upanishads.

So far, then, as the last stanza, the poem seems clear as an explanation of the soul: "Those who think the immortal soul may be destroyed are little cognizant of its nature. It is incomprehensible; it has innumerable conflicting characteristics. It is all pervasive; it is present even in those who do not believe in its existence." But what is the meaning of the last stanza? One would expect the strong gods and the seven highest saints to possess immortal souls, and one would naturally expect that the meek lover of the good who found immortality would enter heaven, not turn his back on it.

In the Kena Upanishad there is a story which explains the position of the gods. In the earlier Vedic period punctilious performance of the ritual had been the one means of satisfying the gods and of obtaining salvation; but in the Brahmanic period, with the rise of the monistic philosophy of Brahma, the gods became dependents and received sustenance from such sacrifices as men might give. The story is that Brahma appeared to the gods and baffled them. Indra (Wisdom) explained that it was Brahma, and Agni, Vayu, and Indra, gained preëminence over the other gods. The gods are only a phase of Brahma and only by Brahma's will perform their functions. There are degrees of immortality and the highest is called *obtaining Brahma*. Even the world of the gods does not give absolute liberation. Yama in one place contrasts the "transient happiness of heaven" with "the permanent place of Yama."

In regard to the "meek lover of good," Yama says in the Katha Upanishad: "The sage chooses even the good because

it exceeds in value what is pleasant;" and in the Prasna Upanishad one finds: "That world of Brahma which is free from dust (decay) will be the share of them in whom there is no crookedness, no lie, no delusion."

Thus I take it that the last stanza means this: "The strong gods and the saints desire to attain a state of unity with Brahma; but it is the meek lover of the good who may find the immortal soul and thus reach a higher goal even than heaven."

The final interpretation, after all, seems a rather simple one and not very different from the first hazy impression I received from reading the poem casually. But I have discovered the obstacles which hindered complete comprehension; I have found that a trivial error (my explanation of *red slayer*) seriously handicapped me in my interpretation; I have learned that a seeming contradiction is quite plausible as judged in the light of the poet's knowledge of his subject; I have arrived at a satisfactory explanation of the poet's use of so many odd and puzzling expressions; and through my search for enlightenment I have received an ineradicable impression of the poem *Brahma*. If my original premise was correct, I should be better able to deal more sympathetically, at least, with the inadequacies of my pupils in the interpretation of literature.

---

### EDITORIAL NOTE

THROUGH the courtesy of Dr. William Setchel Learned, acting for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, we are privileged to send to our members with this issue of the *Leaflet* Clyde Furst's *The Study of English*, a reprint from the *Twentieth Annual Report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*, 1925. Mr. Furst here presents the comments which nine American Rhodes Scholars have made upon the questions in English prepared by the College Entrance Examination Board during recent years. It is particularly enlightening to have the criticism of those who have had the advantage of dual training in America and in England.